

Aliona Podolean knew from the moment she started teaching English that she had found what she wanted to do. “Teaching arrested me during my first teaching practice at the university,” said Ms. Podolean, a Senior Lecturer at Shevchenko State University. “I remember that day so vividly. I was running home after my first lesson to inform my family that I would be a teacher, but, before that day, I had assured everybody I would be an interpreter.”



Aliona Podolean at her desk

Photo by Eve Smith

Ms. Podolean believes that she is “standing on the shoulders” (Hunter 2013) of several teachers whom she had the privilege to work with as a student. The two teachers she has modeled herself after, Tatiana Vergazova and Svetlana Morozova, are inspiring and engaging. You would not know that Rybnitsa, Transnistria, two hours from Chisinau (Moldova’s capital), is a powerhouse for teachers. Transnistria is sandwiched between the River Dniester and the Moldovan border with Ukraine.

Ms. Podolean’s approach for her entire 22-hours-a-week teaching schedule is to teach every lesson as if it were her last. This responsibility to her students shows in her commitment to continuing her education as a teacher through classroom observations and by participating in webinars and conferences at home and abroad. “I am always in search for challenging ideas and creative approaches in teaching and learning; that is why I do hope to be a valuable instructor for my students,” she said. During workshops, she has been exposed to different methodologies and said, “I am really fond of TEAM work as I do believe it makes wonders as Together Everybody Achieves More success.” She sums up her teaching philosophy by saying, “We are like boats floating in the rough ocean, seeking the effective routes.”

Ms. Podolean is fortunate to be teaching groups of 10 to 15 students, an ideal number. “That’s why we may enjoy seating in circles or semicircles, creating a cozy and friendly atmosphere,” she said. “The only case to change the seating is when we have classes in another wing of our building, which is arranged for larger groups from the science and economics departments.” She mentioned that when the weather warms up and spring bursts through, students and teachers take advantage of the beautiful park in front of the university building, and sometimes they hold classes outside. After a cold, dark winter, being outside for class is a welcome change from the normal classroom environment of wooden desks, wooden chairs, and a blackboard. The school building has a few multimedia rooms with computers, speakers, and projectors; however, most of the classrooms do not have this equipment.

During 80-minute classes, Ms. Podolean uses a student-centered approach. She explained, “I can describe one of my recent classes. It was with intermediate students on the theme ‘we are different,’ taken from our textbook. The goal of it was to have students practice speaking, listening, and writing by using imagination and critical thinking skills. At the beginning of the class, each student made



The park in front of the university

Photo by Eve Smith

up two false and one true sentence on the basis of the text studied during the previous class. Then they exchanged the sentences and corrected the false ones. Having warmed up, we approached the main aim of the class—speaking about different characteristics of people and our attitude to them. Students formed mini groups to share their opinions on their home task using Venn diagrams.”

Ms. Podolean explained how the class then flowed to individual work with students answering a questionnaire, and then to pair work to practice agreement and disagreement on the topic. While this description represents only a small part of the class period, it is clear from the structure and the students’ engagement—which is a top priority for her—that Ms. Podolean is committed to encouraging learner autonomy. She strives to “encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, as our educational standard urges learning autonomy, but students do little outside the classroom.” She reflects on this problem, and she tries to address it within the classroom. All of her lessons are structured to teach students how to learn English on their own since she considers the development of learning autonomy her biggest teaching challenge.

“Today, our teachers face real difficulties connected with the low level of students’ autonomy,” she said. Along with attempting to guide her students to build learning autonomy, Ms. Podolean works to improve their motivation levels by integrating realia into the classroom. She said, “All the sources taken together reflect real-world situations and contexts, as well as demonstrate what students can actually do with the language.” She believes that when students see what they can do, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to take ownership of their learning process.

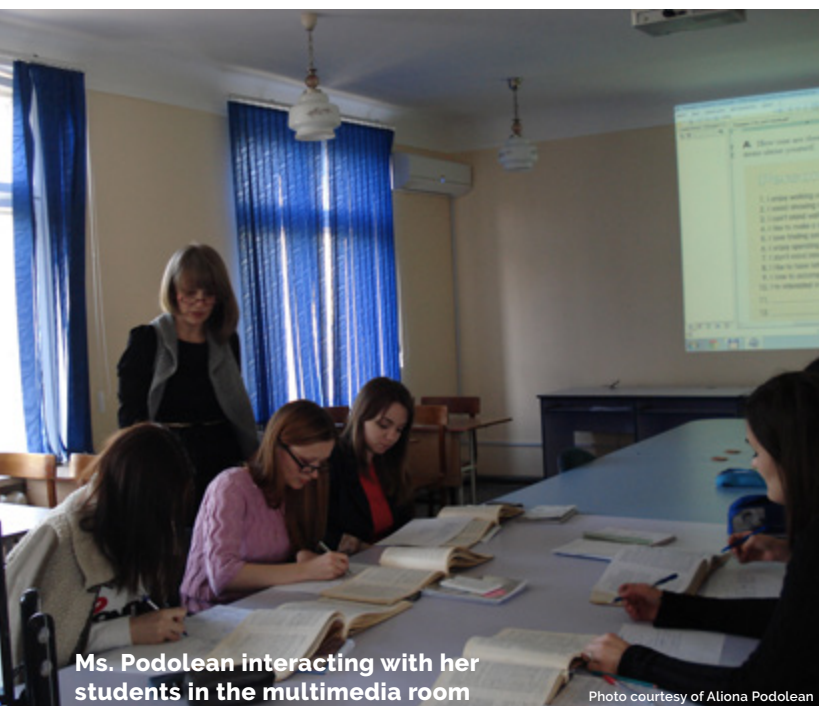
Ms. Podolean and her colleagues work hard to ensure that they create the best classroom environment possible for their students. She feels particularly proud of two elements in her lessons: “First, efficiency—when everybody is engaged and eager to share their knowledge, experience, and feelings. Second, creativity, because my major target of a class is reinforcing integrating and producing rather than recalling and reproducing.” These principles have helped her work effectively within a changing environment. Although she has to follow a set curriculum, she pointed out that new education standards are being implemented throughout her region.

Ms. Podolean’s interactions with students and colleagues demonstrate that she is continuing the legacy of her esteemed mentor teachers. Students glow when they talk to her. Returning to Transnistria ten years from now, or visiting it then for the first time, one would not be surprised to find a local teacher who mentions Ms. Podolean as a model teacher and mentor.

REFERENCE

Hunter, J. “Solving for X: Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Essentials.” Plenary presented at TESOL International Convention, Dallas, Texas, March 2013.

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Ms. Podolean interacting with her students in the multimedia room

Photo courtesy of Aliona Podolean